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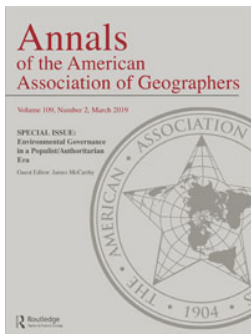
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# Neoliberalizing Authoritarian Environmental Governance in (Post)Socialist Laos

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The (post)socialist nation of Laos has pursued neoliberal economic reforms over the past decade that have facilitated the concession of state lands to foreign resource investors for mining, hydropower, and plantation projects. Five percent of the national territory has been ceded and tens of thousands of peasants have been displaced from their customary lands. In this article, I argue that the development of the resource sector has been facilitated by a political–economic regime of neoliberal authoritarianism. Resource extraction is driven by neoliberal economic policies that prize rapid gross domestic product growth, foreign resource investment, and wage-based rural development. This emerging neoliberalism, however, is matched with and dependent on state authoritarianism. The state seeks to assert control over rural lands throughout the country and often peasants are displaced from using these lands when heavy-handed state coercion and repression of peasant resistance are applied. This is particularly apparent in the establishment of industrial tree plantation territories in southern Laos. Efforts by civil society organizations to highlight these injustices and protect rural land rights are often silenced by the state. Fissures in the neoliberalization of authoritarian development are being exposed, however, due to new forms of resistance among the peasantry that threaten its future viability. *Key Words:* authoritarianism, Laos, neoliberalism, postsocialism, resource extraction.

过去十年来，（后）社会主义国家老挝追求将国家土地转让给矿业、水力发电和发电厂计画的外国资源投资者之新自由主义经济改革。国土的百分之五被割让，而数以千万计的农夫从惯常生活的土地上被迫迁徙。我于本文中主张，资源部门的发展受到新自由主义威权主义的政治经济体制所推进。资源攫取是由重视国内生产总值的快速增长、外国资源投资，以及基于工资的乡村发展的新自由主义经济政策所驱动。然而此一浮现中的新自由主义，却是与国家威权主义相符合并依赖其生存。国家寻求对全国农村土地进行控制，而农民使用这些土地而经常遭受迫迁时，则面临国家对农民反抗的粗暴胁迫与镇压。此般境况在老挝南部发展产业植林的领土上特别显著。公民社会组织凸显这些不公义和保护农村土地权利的努力，经常被国家噤声。但由于农民所采取的崭新反抗形式，威权主义发展的新自由主义化的内部分歧遭到暴露，并威胁其未来的可行性。 *关键词:* 威权主义，老挝，新自由主义，后社会主义，资源攫取。

La nación (post)socialista de Laos ha perseguido reformas económicas neoliberales durante la pasada década que han facilitado la concesión de tierras del estado a inversionistas extranjeros en recursos para minería, hidroelectricidad y proyectos de plantaciones. El cinco por ciento del territorio nacional ha sido cedido y decenas de miles de campesinos han sido desplazados de sus tierras habituales. En este artículo, sostengo que el desarrollo del sector de los recursos ha sido facilitado por un régimen político–económico de autoritarismo neoliberal. La extracción de recursos es orientada por políticas económicas neoliberales que valoran el rápido crecimiento del producto nacional bruto, la inversión foránea en recursos y el desarrollo rural basado en salario. Este neoliberalismo emergente, sin embargo, va emparejado con el autoritarismo estatal y depende del mismo. El estado busca reafirmarse en el control de las tierras rurales a través de todo el país y a menudo los campesinos son desplazados del uso de estas tierras cuando se aplica contra la resistencia campesina la mano dura de la coerción y represión del estado. Esto es particularmente aparente en el establecimiento de territorios para plantaciones de árboles industriales en el sur del país. Los esfuerzos de organizaciones de la sociedad civil para destacar estas injusticias y proteger los derechos a la tierra rural son a menudo silenciados por el estado. Sin embargo, fisuras en la neoliberalización del desarrollo autoritario están siendo expuestas, debido a nuevas formas de resistencia entre el campesinado que amenazan viabilidad futura de aquel modelo de desarrollo. *Palabras clave:* autoritarismo, extracción de recursos, Laos, neoliberalismo, postsocialismo.

Over the past three decades, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (hereafter Lao PDR or Laos), a small, (post)socialist nation in mainland Southeast Asia, has increasingly opened its once centralized, command-and-control economy to market forces of regional and global trade, investment, and commodity production. With a gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 7 to 8 percent between 2005 and 2015 (World Bank 2017a), Laos has quickly stepped in line with the Asian "miracle" of capitalist economic growth that it had previously shunned in its strictly socialist era (from 1975 to the mid-1980s). Such growth has been led by large-scale investment in the extractive sector, particularly mining, hydro-power dam construction, logging, and industrial agricultural and tree plantations. Land has become progressively commodified as the government has leased and conceded land ostensibly owned by the state to investors for resource extraction projects as well as infrastructure development, special economic zones, and urban real estate development. Over 1 million ha of so-called state land has been conceded in such fashion, equivalent to 5 percent of the national territory (Schönweger et al. 2012).

Due to this economic transformation, GDP per capita has increased from \$1,617 in 1990 to \$6,073 in 2016.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, new economic opportunities have engendered widespread corruption and wealth inequality has rapidly widened (Warr, Rasphone, and Menon 2015). Much of the new capital accumulation has flowed into urban areas, whereas the externalities from resource extraction have accumulated in the countryside. Rural people, especially upland ethnic minorities, have been displaced and resettled, have been dispossessed of their ancestral agricultural and forestry lands, have lost access to valuable forest products and ecosystem services, and have become alienated from culturally important territories and lands (Lawrence 2008; Kenney-Lazar 2012; Delang et al. 2013; Smirnov 2015). They have become increasingly dependent on wage labor as their access to rural means of production declines (Baird 2011; Molina 2011; Kenney-Lazar 2012). Concurrently, deforestation has accelerated rapidly throughout the country (Thomas 2015).

This rapid and dramatic transformation of Laos's countryside, resource landscape, and rural nature–society relations is often framed as an outcome of the country's transition away from socialism toward a market-based economy (Stuart-Fox 1997; Rigg 2005;

Pholsena 2006). Such a narrative is characteristic of scholarship on neoliberalism that prioritizes the general expansion of globalized neoliberal capitalism as the driving force of political–economic transformation in postcolonial and postsocialist contexts such as Laos and China (Bond 2000; Harvey 2005; Goldman 2005; Sharma and Gupta 2006). Such a perspective, applied to the Lao case, fails to see the ways in which (1) this transformation came about as a state project, rather than one imposed by external market forces, facilitated not by the socialist state drawing back but by directly intervening, and (2) how the contemporary Lao economy is mixed and hybrid, whereby the socialist state plays as significant a role in its functioning as does the market. Scholarship that emphasizes neoliberalization as a specific process rather than neoliberalism as a general political–economic system has better captured the ways in which neoliberal economic policies and projects materialize across space in uneven, variegated, incomplete, locally contingent, and even hybrid ways (Peck and Tickell 2002; Ong 2006; Brenner et al. 2010; Springer 2011). I build on this literature to examine the articulation of neoliberal economic policies with coercive political power to argue that the hybrid state–market economy that has developed in Laos hinges on the production and deployment of authoritarian state power. Acting in various undemocratic, top-down, controlling, coercive, and repressive ways, the authoritarian Lao state has forced neoliberal reforms on the Lao economy and population and continues to play a dominant role in ensuring that a model of rapid economic growth based on large-scale resource extraction projects continues unabated, despite contestation.

There are key elements of neoliberalism and authoritarianism that are well suited for rapid capital accumulation and economic growth, especially in resource-based economies. These close links have been well recognized in the literature on neoliberal authoritarianism, such as in the Pinochet (Chile) and Fujimori (Peru) regimes of Latin America (Mauceri 1995; Roberts 1995; Kay 2002); Turkey and Egypt in the Middle East (Oğuz 2009; Roccu 2012); and Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar in Southeast Asia (Springer 2011; Hirsch and Scurrah 2015; Creak and Barney 2018). Authoritarian power is particularly important for rearranging rural spaces to make way for large-scale resource investment projects, coercively resettling, displacing, and

dispossessing rural people of their lands, resources, and territories. Neoliberal reforms allow for the creation of the forms of private property that investors require and the rights to commodify labor and nature to create resource commodities for export.

Yet, the pairing of neoliberalism and authoritarianism can meet its own limits and resistance, thus only facilitating short periods of capital accumulation. In Laos, this has occurred due to three interrelated processes that are characteristic of Polanyi's (1944) countermovement, in which society (and government) reacts to the unrestricted marketization of land and labor. First, large-scale projects do not necessarily match the goals of efficient rapid economic growth and state revenue generation, as many projects are inefficient in their use of land and their profitability, failing or falling far short of their targets (Schönweger and Messerli 2015; Lu and Schönweger 2017). Second, the disruptions that such projects create between rural people and their ancestral lands and resources, especially when they lead to increased hardship and suffering, are generating resistance to them and even threatening authoritarian control. Third, these threats to the model of large-scale resource extractive growth are forcing the Lao state to consider limiting the most authoritarian forms of neoliberal economic development, particularly widespread, coercive land dispossession.

The article's arguments are developed as follows. First, I connect literatures from political ecology, economic geography, and political geography to conceptualize the neoliberalization of authoritarian environmental governance. Next, I trace the history of the neoliberalization of the Lao resource regime, showing how contemporary economic transformations reflect the integration between a neoliberal economic model and an authoritarian state. I then show how authoritarian power both facilitated and is a part of contemporary capital accumulation projects in Laos by reflecting on cases of industrial tree plantations (rubber and eucalyptus) in southern Laos. Thereafter, I reflect on the barriers and resistance to a neoliberal authoritarian model that have emerged in the last few years and what they mean for the future direction of resource capital accumulation and economic change in Laos.

These arguments emerge from field research conducted in Laos between 2013 and 2015. The research consisted of interviews and focus groups with Chinese and Vietnamese industrial plantation

investors, government officials at multiple administrative levels, civil society organizations, and villages in the zones of investment. Government and investor documents and maps related to tree plantation projects were also collected.

## Neoliberal Authoritarian Environmental Governance

Much has been written about the neoliberalization of nature and neoliberal environmental governance by political ecologists, particularly the expansion of capitalist accumulation and commodification into hitherto untouched realms of nature, the transformation of public and common spaces into private property, the deregulation of the environment, the governance of the environment by market logics, and the various forms of accumulation by dispossession that enable these processes (Boyd et al. 2001; Harvey 2003; McCarthy 2004; Bakker 2005; Heynen et al. 2007; Castree 2008; Smith 2009). The neoliberalization of nature is framed as a key element of its destruction and the creation of environmental injustices, whereby environmental "goods" tend to be controlled and enjoyed by the wealthy, whereas environmental "bads" are borne by the poor, especially communities of color (Holifield 2001, 2004).

The neoliberal natures literature, however, tends to sidestep analyzing the political forms that accompany and are imbricated with such neoliberal transformations, especially the role of the state in its most dominant and authoritarian forms, representative of political ecology's ambivalent approach toward theorizing the state (Robertson 2015). Economic geography scholarship on neoliberalism has recognized the role of the state in facilitating and maintaining neoliberal transformations. Peck and Tickell (2002) wrote about the ways in which neoliberalism "rolls back" certain elements of the state while "rolling out" new forms of regulation that facilitate capital accumulation. "Actually existing neoliberalism" is interrogated to distinguish between how neoliberalism operates in practice and how neoliberalism is framed as an intellectual or ideological project (Brenner and Theodore 2002). Such approaches recognize the different, variegated, specific, and contingent forms of neoliberalism that manifest in distinct places (Brenner et al. 2010) and

that neoliberalism is a moving target, a dynamic and ongoing process (Peck and Tickell 2002).

Closer examinations of the economic transformations under way in postsocialist and postcolonial contexts show that neoliberal reforms are only part of the picture and are integrated into existing authoritarian power structures (see Springer 2011; Lim 2014). As Ong (2006) demonstrated, East Asian countries have only selectively adopted and applied neoliberalism to particular sectors, populations, and spaces and thus have remained exceptional. Selective neoliberal interventions are integrated into the governing dynamics of a range of postcolonial, authoritarian, and postsocialist regimes across East and Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia and Laos, neoliberal economic reforms become wrapped up and embedded within elite state and party patronage networks that ensure the endurance of authoritarian regimes (Cock 2010; Hughes and Un 2011; Barney 2013; Creak and Barney 2018). In postsocialist contexts, the rapid entrance of market relations into previously socialist spaces can link neoliberal economic opportunities with the unchecked power of political elites (Sikor et al. 2009; Stahl 2010). Similarly, the transition from socialist collectivization to capitalist private property is often accompanied by a period of unclear property rights that the state and other elites can exploit to grant land and resources to private investors (Verdery 2003; Sturgeon and Sikor 2004).

An emerging literature on authoritarian neoliberalism sheds light on the importance of linkages between economic transformations and undemocratic political power (Bruff 2014, 2016). In reflecting on the social and democratic resistance to neoliberal transformation, Bruff (2016) wrote that “state-directed coercion insulated from democratic pressures is central to the creation and maintenance of this politico-economic order, defending it against impulses towards greater equality and democratization” (105). Similarly, Hickel (2016) argued that the radical market deregulation of neoliberalism requires the “dismantling or circumvention of the very democratic mechanisms that neoliberal ideology claims in theory to support and protect” (142), in part by enabling corporate elites to capture political institutions at the expense of voters. Such perspectives contribute to Polanyi’s (1944, 147) famous statement that “laissez-faire was planned” in that such planning is often coercive and repressive.

In this article, I focus on the ways in which neoliberal reforms are mapped onto already existing authoritarian sociopolitical relations rather than the ways in which they produce new forms of authoritarianism. For that reason, I frame such integration as the neoliberalization of authoritarian governance, rather than Bruff’s (2014) “authoritarian neoliberalism,” defined as the merging of neoliberal economic rationales and objectives with coercive, top-down, repressive political power. At times they might sit awkwardly in contradiction with one another, inhabit different parts of the state, or manifest in different geographies. At other times, though, the logics of neoliberalism and state authoritarianism operate in concert, indistinguishable from one another. I use Bruff’s (2014) argument that authoritarianism should not be understood as only the exercise of brute coercive force but as the ways in which state and institutional power are reconfigured to insulate government and corporate policies and institutional practices from social and political dissent. Neoliberal authoritarianism can be applied more specifically to the ordering of nature and socioecologies to facilitate nature-based accumulation strategies. In the case of resource extraction, authoritarian power is particularly important for removing communities from the sites of extraction, cutting their ties to the natural resources of the area, and repressing any resistance or protest over these actions, including by civil society and media actors.

## **An Emerging Neoliberal Authoritarian Resource Regime in Laos**

The history of the Lao PDR, since its establishment in 1975, has been an often-messy process of merging the political structures and goals of state socialism with a suitable underlying economic system to lead it there. Initially, the government sought to achieve this through the mechanisms of a nonmarket, centralized, command-and-control economy, but when the failures of state socialism became apparent, dragging down the economy and starving the regime of valuable economic resources, they sought to find a different economic mechanism to achieve these goals: market-based regional and global integration (Stuart-Fox 1997). Like China and Vietnam before it, Laos has sought to achieve economic growth through market reforms while keeping its political structure intact, to develop something along the

lines of what the Chinese communist party has referred to as “market socialism” (Nonini 2008). The result, which I refer to as (post)socialist, combines the market reforms of neoliberalism with authoritarian political control, generating a hybrid economy, especially in the political–economic governance of land and natural resources (Andriesse 2011; Barney 2013; Yamada 2018).

When the Lao PDR was established in 1975, any form of market activity, whether private trade, business, or investment, was prohibited in an effort to develop a socialist economy. Businesses were nationalized as state-owned enterprises, such as state logging companies, which provided one of the main sources of cash incomes for the new government. The government also required that rural Lao people work in agricultural collectives, combining land and tools to produce rice for themselves and the state. Such collectives failed due to inefficiency and resistance from peasants who preferred their old ways of life (Evans 1990). Economic collapse was only avoided due to the provision of significant amounts of aid by the Soviet Union and Vietnam that helped prop up the Lao regime (Stuart-Fox 1997).

Politically, the early years after the establishment of the Lao PDR were characterized by attempts to secure the stability of the new regime (Creak and Barney 2018). In some areas of the country, this was characterized by ongoing conflicts with rebel groups that had been aligned with the U.S.-backed Royalist regime (Evans 2002; Baird 2018). In areas of the country firmly controlled by the new government, perceived enemies of the state, particularly officials and soldiers associated with the prior regime, were sent to reeducation camps in remote areas of the country, especially the northeastern provinces near Vietnam (Stuart-Fox 1997; Creak 2018). The government set up new forms of surveillance throughout the country by putting people in power at the village level who were friendly to the government and could report on any suspicious activity. Residents of Vientiane were required to attend regular meetings at which they were supposed to criticize their reactionary behavior and thinking, which was surely surveilled by the state (Khamkeo 2006).

As early as the late 1970s, it was apparent that the state socialist economy was faltering (Yamada 2018), exacerbated in the mid-1980s by the dwindling aid provided by the economically collapsing Soviet Union. In concert with Vietnam—Laos’s

closest political ally that was undergoing a similar economic crisis—the Lao government initiated market-based economic reforms in 1986, termed the New Economic Mechanism. The concept was framed in politically acceptable terms by the revolutionary leader and then Prime Minister Kaisone Phomvihane (Yamada 2018). In a piecemeal fashion over the course of many years, it eased restrictions on foreign investment, trade, and business operations and led to the revival of the economy (Evans 2002).

In the mid-1990s, the first foreign land and resource investments were made, enabled by the 1988 Law on Foreign Investment. New laws were passed in the 1990s, including a rewritten constitution, intended to attract foreign investment by showing that Laos would become a “rule of law” state (Creak 2018), governed by consistent and stable rules rather than by arbitrary decrees from the party leadership. As the government sought to provide legal stability for foreign investors, with equal importance it has projected an image of political stability, often cited as one of its greatest assets (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2017). The government continued to resettle ethnic minority groups from upland to lowland areas as part of a strategy to keep track of villages, areas, and groups associated with rebel activity (Baird and Shoemaker 2007). Any sign of dissent was quashed, such as a peaceful student-led democracy protest in 1999 that led to the arrest of four protest leaders (Inthapannha and Souksavanh 2014; Baird 2018).

In the mid-2000s, the government sought to further facilitate foreign investment in land by developing a policy concept of turning land into capital (TLIC), which can be interpreted as generating revenue from land (Pathammavong et al. 2017). The policy was never issued as an official legal document, but it acted as a form of political support for various types of land commodification projects, such as land titling and the long-term lease and concession of state land to the private sector. Although TLIC-inspired investments aim to generate economic growth by allowing the private sector to profit from the commodification of the country’s land, they are based on the deployment of state power over land, using various degrees of coercion and state authority. This is particularly the case for state land concessions, which rely on the leasing of “state” land for periods of up to ninety-nine years. The Lao legal framework gives the government significant powers of management and control over the country’s land

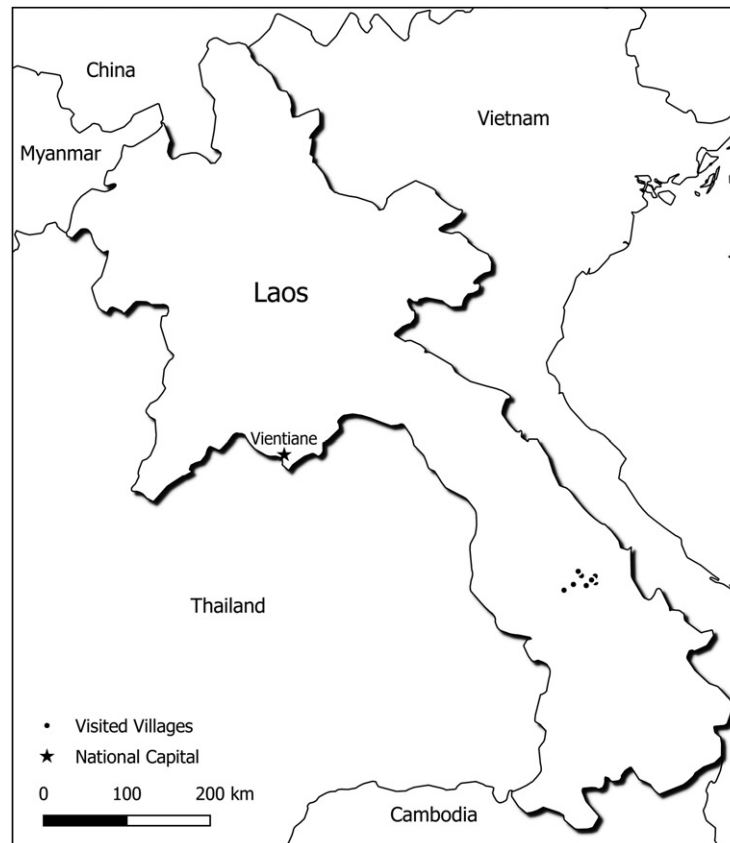


Figure 1. Location of visited villages in Laos. *Source:* Author drawing.

and thus it can be claimed that there are large swaths of state land available for investors to control. In reality, however, most land throughout the country is occupied and used by Lao people (Barney 2009). Thus, as Dwyer (2013) showed, state land must be produced before it can be transferred to investors, and this is done by using authoritarian powers to coercively expropriate such land from the Lao peasantry.

Not surprising, the expropriation of land has led to anger and frustration among the peasantry, even meeting resistance in some areas. Thus, dispossession is a socially disruptive process that the state must manage (Dwyer 2014). Most open forms of resistance have been met with state repression and detention (Baird 2017; Kenney-Lazar, Suhardiman, and Dwyer 2018). The government has also intimidated many who consider resisting and the state does not provide any effective means of addressing grievances or pressing legal cases when companies have practiced social and environmental abuses (Gindroz 2017). Such pressure has also been extended to civil society organizations and their staff who work with communities on these issues. In 2012, a prominent Lao

civil society member, Sombath Somphone, was forcibly disappeared during a routine police traffic stop when driving home from work, due to his prominent role in hosting a civil society forum where land concessions were hotly debated (FORUM-ASIA and AEPF-IOC 2014). Several of the Lao participants who spoke up at the event were investigated and harassed by government officials in their home provinces (Kenney-Lazar 2016). In the years following this event, civil society organizations were afraid to work on these issues and tended to keep a low profile.

### The Neoliberal-Authoritarian Production of Industrial Plantations

Authoritarian power has been essential for creating the “state land” essential for attracting foreign investors to develop industrial tree plantations. Nationally, more than 440,000 ha of land have been conceded for industrial crop plantations, including sugar cane, cassava, rubber, and eucalyptus (Schönweger et al. 2012). The combination of



multinational capital with state authoritarianism to produce state and corporate controlled land concessions and to export commodities for a global market was on full display with two industrial tree plantation projects studied in southern Laos. The first, the Quasa-Geruco Joint Stock Company (QSG), is a subsidiary of the Vietnam Rubber Group and was granted 8,650 ha to develop rubber plantations and a latex processing facility in eastern Savannakhet, southern Laos. The second, Shandong Sun Paper Industry Company (SP), is the largest privately held Chinese paper and pulp producer and was granted a concession of 7,324 ha to develop eucalyptus and acacia trees as well as a paper and pulp processing facility in the same general area as QSG (Figure 1).

Authoritarian power was used by provincial- and district-level Lao government officials to secure land for QSG and SP that would otherwise be unavailable for lease or purchase. The top-down model of acquiring land for plantation development was apparent in the coercive way in which village concerns about the project impacts, loss of land, and adequate compensation were brushed aside and government officials sought to repress any form of resistance. Villages were often visited by company managers and staff and government officials from the central to district levels who presented the project as a done deal, signed and approved by the central-level government and approved at all lower levels, to cover lands within the village territory that were claimed to belong to the state.

When villagers refused to concede their lands to the project outright, especially if they were not given the chance to negotiate the terms of the project and their compensation, government officials threatened to single out and name uncooperative villagers. At one point, the district governor visited some of the hesitant villages targeted for the QSG and asked for a list of the names of those who refused to accept the project, threatening to bring those villagers to the district office for education, reminiscent of the reeducation camps that officials from the Royalist regime were sent to after the war. In the case of SP, threats were made toward a village that consistently refused to concede land to the project. Ignoring village concerns, the clearance of village land was approved and the company arrived with its bulldozers as well as soldiers and police officers to escort them and prevent any problems with villagers. One villager expressed clearly how such action had repressed their attempts at resistance: "Villagers were afraid of the soldiers beating them, the police officers

beating them. If they wanted to arrest the villagers, they could do what they want" (Focus group interview with village leaders, 10 March 2014, Xaylom village).

The state also plays a critical role in creating a hybrid form of property used for plantation development that is owned by the state but under corporate control. The production of concession lands is a rapid, disjunctive process of marketization that these areas had not previously experienced. Most of the lands targeted by QSG and SP were customarily used and passed down among generations. Although the property had yet to be formalized by the state, it had been used for many years under village and household customary rules and systems. Thus, in the production of tree plantations, the state effectively created a hybrid form of property out of such territories that was jointly controlled by state and corporate actors. They did so not by claiming it as private property, as this would have been easy for villagers to refuse. They achieved this by claiming it as state property, which was backed up by the law but also by state legitimacy and the threat of state repression and violence. This land then became corporate controlled but still ultimately belonged to and was protected by the security apparatus of the state.

## A Neoliberal Authoritarian Resource Regime in Crisis?

Recent events suggest that there are fissures emerging in the neoliberal authoritarian land regime of Laos that could threaten its perpetuation. Due to village resistance and discontent, widely recognized negative socioenvironmental impacts, limited ability for the government to collect revenues from land investments, and international pressure from bilateral and multilateral development donors, the Lao government has placed several successive moratoriums on the approval of new land concessions (the most recent of which is still in place) and has been reconsidering the role of the TLIC policy (Kenney-Lazar, Dwyer, and Hett 2018). Rather than charting a new path that diverges away from neoliberal authoritarianism, it is likely that the Lao government will seek to curb its most extreme elements to stave off crises of socioenvironmental destruction and state illegitimacy that could generate widespread dissent. Nonetheless, these reactions from society and the state reflect a Polanyian countermovement to the authoritarian marketization of land and labor

imposed on the Lao countryside by the socialist state.

Despite the authoritarian nature of the development of land concessions throughout the country, there is an increasing number of cases of resistance by communities that refuse to concede their village territories (see McAllister 2015; Baird 2017; Kenney-Lazar, Suhardiman, and Dwyer 2018). Although most of the villages targeted by QSG and SP lost significant amounts of village land to such projects, some were able to put up an effective front of resistance and refusal, often by working through back channels and political connections with sympathetic government officials to protect some areas of village land,<sup>3</sup> especially lands recognized by the state as property of individual households for agricultural production. This type of resistance has led to a recognition by government officials at all levels that the idea of available or empty state land awaiting investors is largely a myth and that most land targeted for concessions is not easily produced without creating some sort of conflict with villagers who currently occupy, use, and govern such land.

Increasing frustration with land conflicts nationwide has filtered up to the government via the few semidemocratic avenues available. The National Assembly, members of which are elected but in a highly controlled and closed process, has opened a telephone hotline for the public to call in and make complaints about issues that concern them during the legislative sessions, and land issues have been one of the top concerns of callers over the past decade. In facing a crisis of legitimacy, not only over land but also illegal logging and corruption, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party selected a new prime minister in 2016 who was charged with changing the people's image of the government and party by halting illegal logging, clamping down on corruption, and addressing chronic land issues throughout the country (Sayalath and Creak 2017). Although these goals are still incomplete, the new leadership has shown that the government is willing to take them seriously.

Reacting to the government's moratoriums on land concessions, investors have turned to alternative forms of land investment that bypass the state, particularly contract farming and leasing land directly from individuals and communities (Dwyer and Vongvisouk 2017). A recent boom in Chinese banana plantations in northern Laos was based on

the model of leasing land from households (Friis and Nielsen 2016). Even SP eventually moved toward a community leasing and contract farming model because they lost political support from the district government, limiting the degree to which the company could mobilize state power to coercively appropriate land from communities. Thus, as the private sector runs up against the limits of neoliberal authoritarianism, they might seek exclusively private sector and neoliberal forms of investment. Yet, such land and agricultural arrangements between plantation companies and farmers carry as many social–environmental risks as large-scale land investments (see Grossman 2000; Dwyer 2013; St. Laurent and Le Billon 2015).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that neoliberal reforms have been integrated into an authoritarian regime of environmental governance in ways that show the close connections between neoliberalism and authoritarianism. This idea builds on a longstanding and evolving literature that recognizes the importance of top-down political structures for implementing and maintaining neoliberal economic transformations, including the repression of resistance to such projects. It also contributes to a broader literature on neoliberalism that demonstrates how neoliberal reforms are dependent on and integrated with state power and that neoliberalization is a project developed unevenly across geographical contexts.

In Laos, the government has selectively adopted neoliberal measures to facilitate foreign investment and rapid economic growth in an attempt to reduce poverty and raise the country's general prosperity. Such measures have been integrated into the Lao governance context, however, in ways that have led to a hybrid state–market economy. For example, private property in the resource extractive sector has been established through long-term concessions of state lands and joint-venture projects between state agencies and foreign investors. Additionally, foreign investors often employ authoritarian state power to develop their projects, particularly in the resource sector for coercively separating Lao peasants from their land and resources.

The linkages between neoliberalism and authoritarianism might be reaching their limits as the

coercive dispossession of peasant lands has begun to create a wave of frustration and various forms of resistance across the Lao countryside, putting pressure on the government to change its policies to maintain its popular legitimacy. The government is currently considering what reforms to implement to reduce the impacts of foreign investments on rural communities while investors are increasingly avoiding a moratorium and limits on land concessions by arranging land deals directly with rural communities and households. Thus, the beginnings of political change might be under way, due not to neoliberal economic transformations but to reactions to them, particularly their authoritarian mode of implementation.

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## Notes

1. Although Laos, like China and Vietnam, is typically referred to as postsocialist, I place *post* in parentheses to reference that the socialist political regime founded in 1975 is still in place and continues to pursue the goals of socialist development but now by market means.
2. GDP per capita is adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP) in constant 2011 U.S. dollars (World Bank 2017b).
3. Similar processes have been recognized in Baird and Le Billon (2012) and Kenney-Lazar, Suhardiman, and Dwyer (2018).

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